THE FUTURE OF THE RCVS FELLOWSHIP – A CONSULTATION
BVA RESPONSE

1) The BVA is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom and has over 14,500 members, who are all members or prospective members of the RCVS. Its primary aim is to protect and promote the interests of the veterinary profession in this country, and it therefore takes a keen interest in all issues affecting the veterinary profession, be they animal health, animal welfare, public health, regulatory issues or employment concerns.

2) We were pleased to have been given the opportunity to contribute to the RCVS consultation on the future of the RCVS Fellowship. In our response to the RCVS pre-consultation in August 2013 we cautiously welcomed the establishment of a Learned Society for the profession. However, we expressed serious concerns regarding the way in which such a body would be funded and the appropriateness of aligning it to the RCVS as the regulatory body. It was also unclear from the proposal exactly what RCVS intended to achieve through the formation of a Learned Society.

3) Following our formal submission to the pre-consultation we were encouraged by the RCVS response, including reassurances that the thinking was to develop a body which could promote discussion based on scientific knowledge, expertise and the balance of probability and in doing so offer a view rather than anything which purported to speak on behalf of the profession.

Principles of the proposal

4) Having previously raised concerns as to how the Fellowship would be ‘housed’ within the College we are pleased to see that the principles of the proposal acknowledge that careful consideration will need to be given regarding the governance arrangements for the Fellowship. Whilst we support the proposal that, in the first instance, the Fellowship will be established under the auspices of RCVS Council, we also strongly support the suggestion that in the future consideration should be given to placing the Fellowship within the RCVS Knowledge governance structure. As the main objective of the Fellowship will be to advance veterinary standards by providing a resource of independent knowledge for the benefit of the profession we believe that this function is more appropriately aligned with RCVS Knowledge, a provider of access to information that is of immediate value to veterinary professionals, than with RCVS as regulator of the profession.

5) We have been reassured of RCVS’s willingness to work constructively and collaboratively with BVA by the assertion that “The Fellowship will not seek to be representative of the veterinary profession, nor would it normally respond to consultations” We support RCVS’s recognition of the need to avoid further blurring the demarcation lines between the role of the College and the role of BVA and believe that this clear statement in the principles of the Fellowship provides valuable clarification.

6) We previously supported the suggestion that the Fellowship could establish lecture and seminar series as such activities are in line with the traditional role of a Learned Society. However, we did raise concerns regarding the suggestion that the Fellowship could act as a source of expert knowledge as this was already provided by BVA and its specialist divisions in a representational manner. We could not, therefore, support activity which duplicated or competed with our specialist divisions
or devalued the position of RCVS recognised specialists. We are pleased to see that this aspiration has been removed and we support the proposed activities listed in the consultation document as befitting a Learned Society.

7) We are also reassured by the statement at paragraph 19 that “The new Fellowship would be quite distinct from other professional specialist groups, such as the BVA specialist divisions and other subject associations, in that it would neither represent the profession nor any specialist group”

Structure of the Fellowship

8) We support the removal of the proposed cap of 1000 Fellows and the removal of the proposal to exclude Fellows over the age of 65 from the total number.

Application and election process

9) We support the removal of Fellows for non-payment of fees or upon ceasing to be on the RCVS Register.

10) There should also be a clear means of revalidating Fellows.

11) We continue to support the three routes to membership of the Fellowship and we support the expansion of the criteria to allow a greater range of meritorious contribution by veterinary surgeons to facilitate access to the Fellowship. We remain very concerned regarding the closure of the route by thesis as it could devalue the achievement of those who have attained the status of Fellow through that route. We also believe that encouraging practitioners to work towards a thesis on some of the many challenging problems seen in practice could provide a valuable contribution to evidence based medicine and, therefore, the removal of this route could be seen as a missed opportunity. However, we are pleased that clarification has been provided that candidates currently registered for the current Fellowship by thesis will still be able to qualify on successful examination of their thesis. Although we appreciate the RCVS proposal that, in the absence of the Fellowship by thesis option, guidance will be provided for those wishing to undertake doctoral level study, we are concerned that this sends out the message that only Doctoral theses are of sufficient merit to warrant a Fellowship. We strongly urge RCVS to reconsider the proposed removal of this route to Fellowship.

12) We previously raised concerns regarding the requirement for applicants to submit supporting statements from two sponsors of whom at least one should normally be an RCVS Fellow. We explained that this approach could give the impression of a “closed shop” or “club” and therefore would be out of touch with current attempts by the RCVS to appear less distant and more inclusive. It could also jeopardise the credibility of the Fellowship if it were perceived that applicants were required to demonstrate “more of who they knew rather than what” alongside their contribution to knowledge, clinical practice or to the profession. We strongly advised the RCVS to consider the image it wished to project and consider an application process which did not exclude, however unintentionally, an extremely meritorious individual who may not have had previous interaction with an existing Fellow. We are therefore pleased to note that the requirement has changed to three sponsors of high professional standing, which could include, but is not limited to, an RCVS Fellow. We would encourage RCVS to give even further consideration to ways in which it might ensure that Fellows are always elected on merit alone.

Funding

13) It remains unclear from the proposal how the Fellowship will be financed. There will be significant costs associated with running the proposed Fellowship including administrative staff and the time involved in receiving and evaluating applications. It remains difficult to see how particularly in the early years that subscription income will be able to fund expenditure.
Conclusion

14) In conclusion, although we are broadly supportive of the proposed new RCVS Fellowship our support comes with the caveat that RCVS clearly explain the rationale behind the proposed removal of the route by thesis. Our members have expressed serious concerns regarding this element of the proposal and we are therefore currently unable to support the suggested change. We also urge RCVS to give further consideration of the concerns raised relating to funding of the Fellowship. We appreciate RCVS’s commitment to alleviating BVA member concerns and working with us to develop a Fellowship which is inclusive and fit for the modern world, and look forward to further discussion regarding the remaining areas of concern detailed above.